



Eleanor Taylor Bland

Biography

African American mystery novelist Eleanor Taylor Bland was born in Boston, Massachusetts on December 31, 1944. She married a sailor when she was fourteen years old. Her husband's last duty station was around the Great Lakes, and they stayed there permanently. Bland went to Southern Illinois University and earned a bachelor's degree in accounting and education in 1981. She then worked at Abbot Laboratories as an accountant until 1999.

Bland has two sons and a number of grandkids. She is currently divorced and lives in Waukegan, Illinois. In the early '70s, Bland suffered from a bout with cancer. Doctors said she would have two years to live; it is now thirty years later. Because of this, her life philosophy became, "Live in the present" (Herguth 20). She says that she thinks she will have time to rest when she dies, but until then, she wants to do everything she can.

In addition to having published a number of short stories in the mystery genre, and having recently edited an anthology of crime and mystery stories by African Americans, Bland has written eleven novels in the Marti MacAlister detective series. In her fiction, she likes to give voice to those people who are normally without voice in our society. She focuses mainly on the homeless, the mentally ill, the elderly and children. Children are a soft spot for Bland because she believes they have no rights in today's world. She says, "Once [children] become involved with the state, anything can happen to them. I mean, a 14-year-old could go to the store and steal something and be in the system until they're 18, while an adult can do the same thing and get six months' probation. Now why can't they find a better alternative for the children?" (Bentley 1E).



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1944
- * African-American mystery novelist
- * Writes the Marti MacAlister detective series

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Bland recognizes that children have very limited choices in this society, and she wants to write in a way that brings public attention to this issue. The mystery genre, in Bland's opinion, is the perfect area in which to do this. Bland also enjoys writing mystery novels because she believes they are fun to read. They leave a lot of space open to deal with pressing issues in an enjoyable way. Bland says, "You can do anything that interests you in the mystery. You really get to say something. We also get to comment on a variety of slices of life within the black culture. There's a tremendous amount of diversity and this is the one genre where you can talk about it and have a little fun with it" (Hughes F5). She uses her writing as a space in which she can explore the differences within Black American culture and the issues that are important to everyone regardless of race.

Of her African-American heroine Marti MacAlister, Bland says, "I wanted her to be like the women I know" (Simmons 7B). Also, she says, "I don't write [Marti] in narrow terms. There is a level at which we are all human, and then there is a level where we are unique" (Hughes F5). Bland has chosen a protagonist who is identifiable to readers but not common enough to be boring. MacAlister has her own idiosyncrasies that make her unique. For example, most people have fallen in love or dream of falling in love at some time in their lives. On this level, readers may find Marti's relationship with Ben refreshingly familiar. However, being abstinent before marriage, as Marti and Ben have chosen to do, is not necessarily the norm in today's sex-driven society. So while people may feel connected to Marti's love for Ben, her abstinence creates a potential gap between Marti and the readers. This allows Marti to be accessible as a character but interesting and unique enough to keep the readers wanting more. The most important thing for Bland is to be connected to her readers, and that is what has made her series such a success.

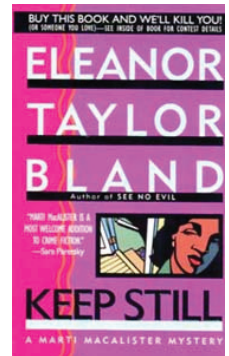
In her first mystery novel, Bland introduces her readers to MacAlister, a streetwise cop who has recently relocated from Chicago to a suburb 30 miles out, Lincoln Prairie. With her, she brings her two children and the ghost of her recently slain husband. *Dead Time* begins when an eccentric woman is found murdered in her hotel room. Marti and her partner, Matthew (Vik) Jessonovik, are assigned to the case. The clues that Marti pieces together suggest that some runaway children were in the hotel and might have seen the killer. Marti enters a race with time to find the killer and the children before someone else does.



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In her second book, *Slow Burn*, Marti is shown still adjusting to her new life in Lincoln Prairie. Four deaths in one week make the most eventful week she has faced since moving from Chicago. As she and Vik investigate the four deaths, it becomes clear that there may be only one culprit. In the search for the killer, an ugly world of child prostitution and pornography is uncovered. As Vik struggles to accept the changes in his childhood town and Marti struggles to deal with the idea of children younger than her daughter subjected to such treatment, the crime becomes hard to handle for both of them. When it looks like it is going to have to remain an unsolved case, neither Vik nor Marti can feel satisfied.



Gone Quiet, the third novel in the series, begins when Gladys finds her husband, Henry, dead in his bed. Although she has been planning to murder him herself, it seems as if natural causes have beaten her to it. It is only when Marti and Vik discover that Henry was suffocated do they begin to look into the option of foul play. Their investigation leads them into the intimate issues that one family has kept hidden for decades. Because Henry was so deeply involved with the church, Marti uses that as the key to unlocking the terrible secrets hidden within his family.

When Johnny's old partner turned up dead, the circumstances surrounding his death seem to be as mysterious as those surrounding Johnny's were. In *Done Wrong*, Marti knows that an investigation will take away from her job and her kids, but until she finds out what happened to her murdered husband, neither she nor her family will be able to accept his death. With the help of her partner Jessenovik, Marti confronts police bureaucracy and the dangers of the Chicago streets to uncover the truth and find the peace that she has been lacking.

Two deaths that appear to be accidental and completely unrelated are the crimes investigated in the fifth MacAlister book, *Keep Still*. Through the course of their investigations, Marti and Vik begin to think that the deaths had to be related. The search for the truth brings the reader into a world of child abuse and neglect and reveals the consequences for a person who tries to help. Marti thinks of her own children and is saddened by the events surrounding this case. The pressing issue of child abuse is so troubling to Marti that even if the case is solved, she knows she will never feel that justice has been done.



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A series of unexplained deaths leave Marti and Vik searching for answers in the sixth book in the MacAlister series, *See No Evil*. When the most likely suspect is easy to blame but hard to find, the urgency with which Marti and Vik must work is increased. What Marti doesn't know is that someone from her past has plans to kill her entire family. The issues of children involved in drugs and gangs as well as the homeless are very pressing in *See No Evil*. The homeless find a voice in the next book as well. *Tell No Tales*, the seventh book in the series, involves Marti and Vik deeply in issues of racism, class, and justice. Two murders, one old and one new, force Marti to return early from her honeymoon. Just as they think they have pieced the clues together, their main suspect ends up dead. Marti and Vik have to take another look into the case and end up finding answers that test their relationship as partners.

In the eighth book in the series, *Scream in Silence*, Bland touches on issues dealing with the mentally ill as well as the elderly. An abandoned house is burned to the ground and a woman's body is found in the cellar. When the arson becomes a reoccurring crime, Marti and Vik crack down to find the culprit and get to the bottom of the woman's death. Their lives become endangered when the arsonist tries to take them out of the picture. Marti realizes that even her new guard dog won't always be able to protect her. With her mother moved in and her new family just beginning to settle, Marti comes to truly understand how unpredictable life can be.

In Bland's ninth novel, *Whispers in the Dark*, homicide detectives Marti and Vik are assigned a most unusual case - all that's left of the unfortunate murder victim is an arm. Their investigation into this murder and dismemberment leads them into the exclusive and secretive history of the artistic community in Lincoln Prairie. Meanwhile, Marti and Ben have to take an emergency trip to the Bahamas to save Sharon from making the biggest mistake of her life. They uncover decade-old issues including racism, mental illness, and spousal and child battery. As usual in the Marti MacAlister series, *Whispers in the Dark* leaves readers looking forward to Bland's next mystery. A prolific writer, Bland never leaves them waiting for very long: since *Whispers in the Dark*, she has published two more books in the series, *Windy City Dying* (2002) and *Fatal Remains* (2003).



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Her novels have given Bland a vehicle through which she can address issues important to her. Her victims are often young, homeless, mentally ill, or elderly. According to Bland, “They are the people that are there that we don’t want to see” (Bentley 1E). By solving the mysteries surrounding the deaths of these people, Bland’s MacAlister brings justice to cases that might have otherwise been quickly (and falsely) solved, and even more quickly forgotten. She shows the reader that the people who are normally voiceless in U.S. society deserve as much justice as anyone else. In fact, one of Marti most important snitches is a homeless man named Isaac. Throughout the series, Marti continuously relies on Isaac’s voice to solve crimes. Even when other officers on the force hassle Marti about getting information from someone who appears to be unreliable, she never gives up on Isaac. Once they build a trusting relationship, Marti even begins to care about this man whom most people would rather not see. She knows that Isaac deserves a certain amount of respect, and she refuses to deny him of that most basic human right simply because of his place in society.

Marti allows human relationships and a basic respect for all of humankind to be her first priorities in life. Beyond her friendship with Isaac, many different types of relationships are developed throughout the books. Each relationship is an outlet through which Bland touches on important societal issues. From feminism to racism, Bland finds a place in Marti’s relationships for important political and social discussion. While her relationships with Ben, Mike, Sharon and Lisa are important to Marti’s development on a personal level, her relationships with her mother, Joanna, Theo, and Vik are the most concerned with social and political issues.

Marti’s relationship with her mother and daughter displays a certain amount of Bland’s feminism. The complex mother-daughter relationships are the main sources of empowerment for all three women. Marti often turns to her mother for advice on life. “Mama Mac” is very receptive to her daughter’s questions and always seems to know exactly what to say. Marti finds a great source of strength in that relationship and passes that strength on to her daughter. Marti gives her the kind of spiritual support that will make Joanna an empowered female in the years to come. However, the strength that Marti shows Joanna is not invincible.



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In *Tell No Tales*, Marti holds Joanna as she cries over losing her boyfriend, Chris:

“ “*She let go of Joanna’s hair, put the comb down, and sat on the floor beside her. “It’s ok. It’s just me and you. I am not always strong, Joanna. You don’t have to be strong right now either.”* ” ”

Marti’s relationship with her son Theo is perhaps the most complex in the series. Marti is constantly worrying about Theo’s emotional well being. She can never tell how he feels about anything until he decides to let her in. Because she is unaware of Theo’s deepest feelings, Marti finds parenting a challenging task where Theo is concerned. This relationship, while it can never be totally compacted into one type of relationship or another, serves in Bland’s books as a source of insecurity for Marti. While she knows that Theo loves her, she is often wondering what he is thinking or feeling about her as a role model and, more importantly, as a mother. Marti’s insecurity breaks down the idea of the “strong black woman” and shows the reader that Marti is indeed a human being and, therefore, is never going to be flawless. Bland wants the reader to understand that being human and having flaws go hand in hand. Perfection is a myth.

Finally, Marti and Vik, through their work relationship, face the issue of racism together. Vik is a white, Polish man who has come to accept Marti as a black woman. While his old-fashioned views about women made him uncomfortable with Marti at first, he never really seemed to have a problem with Marti’s race. In fact, in a number of the books in the series (*Done Wrong*, *See No Evil*, *Tell No Tales*, *Scream in Silence* and *Whispers in the Dark*), Marti and Vik team up against racism in Lincoln Prairie and the surrounding area. This relationship is significant because Marti and Vik are equally accepting of each other’s heritage, and they share a respect for each other’s backgrounds. Marti has even taken the time to learn a little bit of Polish in order to talk to Vik in his native tongue. This would be an ideal relationship to have in a completely multicultural society, which is exactly what Bland would like to see developed in the world (Hughes, f5).



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Unfortunately, however, Bland's vision of a multiethnic society has not come true in today's society. As she says, "I truly believe minorities are underrepresented in most things and where we are [represented], we're some auxiliary to someone else. I want us to be center stage" (Bentley 1E). Therefore, Bland believes she must write her novels in order to get her message across to anyone who will listen. She believes that it is time to include everyone in our view of the world, no matter what her or his race, class, gender or age. Marti MacAlister, and all of the people with whom she is involved, are slowly making their way to center stage with each novel Bland writes.

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